

# North Korea and Nuclear Weapons - Policy Options

What follows is a framework of policy “Options” that address the current debate about North Korea. These options are designed to help you think about a range of possible policies and the ramifications of each.

The four options provided are not intended as a menu of choices. Rather, they are framed in stark terms to highlight very different policy approaches. Each option includes a set of criticisms against it. These are designed to help you think carefully about the risks and trade-offs of each.

After you have had a chance to consider each of the options presented, think about your concerns and values and deliberate with your peers on the strengths and challenges of each of the options presented. Then we encourage you to articulate your own considered judgment on this issue. You may want to borrow heavily from one of the options presented, combine ideas from several, or take a new approach altogether. As you frame your “Option 5,” think about the following questions:

- What U.S. interests are at stake in this issue?
- What is the history of U.S. relations with North Korea?
- What is motivating North Korea to take this path?
- In the current situation with North Korea, what is the difference between six-party and bilateral negotiations?
- How pressing is the issue of North Korea compared to other security priorities?
- How does the war on terrorism fit into discussion about this issue?
- How does our relationship with South Korea, China, Russia, and Japan fit into this issue?
- What steps should the United States take in the coming weeks and months?
- What should our long-term goals be?
- What values are important to you?
- What are the pros and cons of this option?

**“North Korea and Nuclear Weapons”** is a Teaching with the News online resource published by the Choices Program at Brown University. Online resources are updated frequently.

**Background Readings, Extension Activities & Additional Web Links** are available from the Resources section of the Choices Program web site—[www.choices.edu/resources](http://www.choices.edu/resources)

*Mapping the Nuclear World* (additional free online lesson plan)

*Online Ballot: Nuclear Weapons Policy*

Link to Arms Control Association — complete text of the 1994 Agreed Framework

Link to BBC News Online — *Q&A: North Korea's Nuclear Threat*

Link to NewsHour with Jim Lehrer (PBS) — *North Korea: Nuclear Standoff*

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## Option 1: Launch a Preemptive Military Strike

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The security of the United States is in jeopardy as long as this regime in North Korea is in power. In order to eliminate the nuclear threat posed by North Korea, we must act quickly and decisively. A speedy, surgical attack on nuclear weapons development sites will destroy North Korea's ability to make nuclear bombs, initiate the downfall of Kim Jong-Il's regime, and send a clear message that the United States will not accept nuclear proliferation. North Korea has already declared that it has several nuclear weapons and has claimed to have tested one of them. Waiting will only give them time to develop more. These could be used against its neighbors, if not against the United States. Weapons-grade fissile material is also easy to transport. Once North Korea has what it feels is enough to maintain leverage, it could begin to sell its nuclear materials to whomever it wants. If we give the North Koreans time, we will never know how much weapons-grade nuclear material was squirreled away in the interim. Therefore, we will never be able to remove North Korea from the list of countries possessing nuclear weapons. This uncertainty could compel Japan or Taiwan to develop their own nuclear weapons program as a deterrent. Nuclear proliferation in Asia could, in turn, set off an arms race that could go worldwide. We must act now to prevent this possibility. Our only option for peace and security in the future is to take military action now.

### Goals of Option 1

- Eliminate North Korea's nuclear capability by destroying the reactors and processors that are producing weapons-grade plutonium and uranium.
- Communicate to other states that nuclear proliferation is unacceptable

### U.S. Policies to Achieve These Goals

- Use the U.S. military to destroy North Korea's nuclear weapons production facilities.
- Prepare to respond to any North Korean attacks.

### Underlying Beliefs of Option 1

- Military might is the only language Kim Jong Il understands. We should not negotiate with irrational, untrustworthy people.
- The molasses-like speed with which the international community can deal with problems such as these will not meet the requirements of the timetable in this case.
- The containment policy in use since 1994 has failed.

### Arguments Against Option 1

- A pre-emptive unilateral attack on North Korea would violate international law.
- To bypass negotiation in favor of plans for military action will only increase North Korea's determination to build a nuclear capability as quickly as possible as a deterrence.
- It is very possible that the North Korean nuclear weapons development facilities are not all above ground. We are sure to miss some of them in a conventional airstrike.
- In response to a military strike North Korea could launch strikes of its own against Japan, China, or South Korea, or our bases in those countries. Such a war could mean the deaths of millions.
- A war could also mean economic disaster resulting from the possible destruction of the Tokyo, Beijing, and Seoul stock markets.
- \* The radiation released from attacks against nuclear weapons facilities could kill thousands and be deadly for years to come.

- \* In order to prevent North Korean retaliation, the United States may be forced to threaten the use of nuclear weapons. Invoking such a threat would put the United States in the position of threatening to kill hundreds of thousands of people.
- \* Our allies in the region are opposed to military action against North Korea.
- \* If this pre-emptive military option leads to war, or even widespread destruction, the United States would be blamed. This would heighten resentment of the United States throughout the rest of the world.
- \* Our presence in the Koreas is already unwanted by many in South Korea. Engaging in a war with their neighbor would destroy an already fragile relationship between the United States and South Korea.

## Option 2: Pressure North Korea to Return to the Six-party Negotiations

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North Korea's declaration of itself as a nuclear power is part of an attempt to gain international leverage with the United States. North Korea has attempted to provoke us in the past, just as they are doing today by demonstrating that they really have nuclear weapons. North Korea's long-range missiles and their arsenal of weapons of mass destruction are of the utmost concern, but we have no reason to give in to their attempts to blackmail us. If we submit to one-on-one negotiations with North Korea, Kim Jong-Il will take advantage of what he perceives to be weakness, and he will only be back later asking for more. We must stand by our policy of negotiating with North Korea only in the company of Russia, South Korea, China, and Japan. North Korea understands the terms we have set out for negotiations. The United States should not provide anything that North Korea wants until it agrees to eliminate its nuclear weapons programs, including halting their uranium enrichment program. The burden should be on North Korea to change its policies first. The United States should use economic pressure to force North Korea to return to the six-party negotiations. Further we must continue to impress upon the countries surrounding North Korea that North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons threatens the countries of the region and their own national interests. South Korea, in particular, must understand that the North is a threat, not simply a wayward relative.

### Goals of Option 2

- \* Contain the threat from North Korea and eliminate its weapons of mass destruction.
- \* Contain the spread of weapons of mass destruction.
- \* Protect U.S. interests in the region.

### U.S. Policies to Achieve These Goals

- \* Engage with North Korea only as part of multi-party talks. Do not reward North Korea's threatening behavior with direct negotiation or with aid.
- \* Impress upon regional powers the severity of the crisis and work with them to push for sanctions in the UN that will bring North Korea back to the negotiation table.
- Make it very clear that we will counter with comparable force—alone or with others—any aggressive actions on the part of North Korea.
- Provide strong U.S. support for International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections.

### Underlying Beliefs of Option 2

- We cannot afford to let North Korea make the rules. Tyrants like Kim Jong-Il only understand force and power. Negotiations and deals that reward bad behavior will only produce more problems for the United States in the long run.
- The people of North Korea are starving; providing aid in return for false promises from the North Koreans only prolongs the existence of a regime that will create another crisis in the future when it needs more assistance.
- Kim Jong-Il is a dangerous dictator but he is not insane. He will not use weapons of mass destruction if he faces the risk of complete annihilation.
- North Korea's withdrawal from talks is not an indefinite decision; we can bring them back to the table.

## Arguments Against Option 2

- North Korea has now demonstrated that they have a nuclear capability. Unless we destroy their weapons facilities, they will continue to build nuclear weapons. Nothing short of a military attack can guarantee U.S. security.
- We have tried to pressure and coax the North Koreans to participate in six-party talks. Unless we agree to talk with them directly, they will not participate in negotiations.
- Pitting six countries against North Korea will not address the underlying problem. The underlying problem is North Korea's fear that its national security is threatened by the U.S. Only bilateral negotiations with the U.S. will address this fear.
- North Korea cannot be coerced back into the six-party talks. While we wait for them to come back to the table, North Korea's weapons could find their way into the hands of terrorists or other states willing to use them and we or our allies will eventually become targets of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction.
- The time it takes to bring all the actors to the table—or even some of them—is too long. In the interim, North Korea will continue developing nuclear weapons.
- North Korea will not do anything for the people of North Korea. Millions are starving and oppressed. It is time for a regime change in North Korea.
- We are unwelcome in South Korea and Asia. Why should we risk American lives or spend our defense dollars for nations whose politicians gain popularity by exploiting public resentment of the United States, but rely on us to protect their countries?

## Option 3: Engage North Korea in Bilateral Negotiations that Involve Concessions on Both Sides

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Nuclear weapons in the hands of North Korea are of deep concern. We will not be able to address the threat they pose unless we engage directly with the North Koreans and allay their security fears by making some concessions ourselves. Six-party negotiations have proven ineffective. North Korea sees these negotiations as coercive and requiring them to make concessions while getting little in return. It has rejected further participation in such discussions because it sees no possibilities for increased security resulting from them. It is time to respond to North Korea in a manner that acknowledges their security concerns. North Korea has long feared American aggression and it is for this reason that they have demanded direct negotiations with the U.S. Because of the deep distrust between the U.S. and North Korea, the two sides should take simultaneous steps, each making concessions of sufficient importance to the other in order to facilitate compromise. Initially, the U.S. should pledge that it will not attack North Korea or seek to undermine its government if North Korea agrees to shut down its plutonium program. Other concerns, such as a possible uranium enrichment program, can be dealt with through later compromises. These mutual concessions can be negotiated most effectively in a bilateral context. The U.S. should be willing to engage with North Korea in bilateral talks as a supplement to the six-party talks.

### Goals of Option 3

- End the development of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles in North Korea.
- Repair U.S.—North Korean relations and engage North Korea in the community of nations in order to remove its motivation to possess weapons of mass destruction.

### U.S. Policies to Achieve These Goals

- Engage with North Korea in bilateral negotiations designed to stop the North Korean nuclear program in exchange for normalization of political and economic relations with North Korea.
- Be prepared to provide energy and other forms of economic aid, and pressure our partners in the six-party talks to do the same, in exchange for an end to the North Korean plutonium program.
- Secure agreements from the North Koreans for resumed IAEA inspections.

### Underlying Beliefs of Option 3

- North Korea does not want to engage in a suicidal war. It simply wants to get the world's attention and economic aid, and be given the security assurances it needs and the aid it was promised by the United States in 1994.
- Negotiation and diplomacy, even when it means expensive compromises, is less costly in lives, resources, and political capital than war.
- Countries in the region will look favorably on the U.S. for alleviating the threat of nuclear war in Asia without resorting to aggression.

### Arguments Against Option 3

- Initiating bilateral talks will be submitting to nuclear blackmail and will weaken the United States in the eyes of the world.
- Peace and security on the Korean peninsula are critical to maintaining stability throughout Asia. This is not just a threat to the United States but also to North Korea's neighbors. They should take responsibility too.
- If we initiate bilateral negotiations, small countries will learn that they can

get what they want from the United States by using “provocations.”

- While we negotiate, North Korea could sell its weaponry to terrorists.
- A policy of engagement will suggest to other rogue leaders that the possession of nuclear weapons will not result in strong action from the United States. Such an outcome would surely lead to further security threats to the United States.
- Our presence in the Koreas is unwelcome. Meddling in the affairs of the region will only subject us to further danger.
- Negotiating with North Korea, after refusing to do so with Iraq, may be seen as a double standard.

## Option 4: Withdraw from the Korean Peninsula

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Our presence on the Korean Peninsula has not stopped the North Koreans from acquiring a nuclear capability. In fact, we may have fueled their desire to build nuclear weapons. The smartest thing that the United States can do at this point is get off of the Korean Peninsula. Our 37,000 troops are neither wanted there nor necessary to protect our Asian allies or ourselves. Meanwhile their presence there is a drain on the U.S. economy. South Korea, with its own army of 600,000, has been hosting many anti-American rallies, as have other Asian countries. Our presence on the peninsula is no longer necessary as a military deterrent and we are clearly not welcome. It seems that our presence on the Korean peninsula only serves to increase anti-American sentiment. Why should we risk American time, money, lives and reputation in the region when it only serves to make the U.S. a target. Pulling our troops off of the peninsula will relieve us of the burdens associated with a U.S. presence, alleviate the tension in the region, and place the responsibility for maintaining security in the region squarely on neighboring countries. We should remove ourselves from the peninsula, lower our profile, and use our time, money, and efforts elsewhere.

### Goals of Option 4

- Eliminate what appears to be a growing pattern of manipulation and threat by the North Korean government.
- Lower our profile on the peninsula and in Asia in general.

### U.S. Policies to Achieve These Goals

- Remove American troops from the peninsula.
- Encourage China, Japan, and Russia to play a more significant role in Asian security.

### Underlying Beliefs of Option 4

- North Korea does not want to go to war with the United States. It just wants publicity and attention.
- Our limited military presence in South Korea does not add to either our or South Korea's security. If a real threat emerges, we have bases in Japan, Guam, and Hawaii to protect our interests in Asia.
- Attacking North Korea, or levying stricter sanctions, will only lead to increased resentment toward our country by greatly exacerbating the humanitarian crisis there.

### Arguments Against Option 4

- By withdrawing, the United States would allow North Korea to continue its nuclear program. This raises the potential of North Korean nuclear material for sale to the highest bidder—including the possibility that it will land in the hands of terrorists. develop nuclear weapons—a reality that endangers the world and weakens our image in the war on terror.
- By withdrawing from the peninsula, the United States might be seen as walking away from a clear and present danger. We can not be seen as running from a challenge, especially with U.S. soldiers fighting in Iraq.
- As the world's lone superpower, it is our responsibility to help ensure the safety of smaller countries. South Korea will be rendered nearly defenseless if the United States withdraws.
- If the United States withdraws, any hope of successful North Korean/South Korean dialogue would be undermined, reducing the potential for reconciliation between the two Koreas.
- By ending all aid to North Korea and refusing to discuss a new aid package, the already horrific humanitarian situation in North Korea could be greatly exacerbated, leading to increased starvation and poverty as well as more anti-American sentiment.



- Leaving North Korea's neighbors to fend for themselves may cause them to adopt their own nuclear weapons programs due to feelings of vulnerability.
- The United States must remain engaged around the world if it hopes to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and terror.
- Withdrawing from the peninsula could be perceived by other countries as a sign of U.S. weakness. The message will be: If you just make enough of the right kind of noise the United States will pick up and leave.
- North Korea, with its desperate economic condition, might sell some of its products to anyone who will pay a pretty penny, including terrorists.